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A Brief Review of *English Style Guide. A Handbook for Authors and Translators in the European Commission*[1]

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Abstract

The aim of the review is to draw attention to some strange activities within the European Commission. According to the Authors, such instructions are intended for English-language translators and authors. In such a case, they are not only misdirected (for those who translate and write in English, *i.e.* professionals), but can be easily found in a multitude of grammars and handbooks; assuming, though, that parliament members, in quite a few cases, are at all interested in the subject of debate rather than just making good money. Can we expect that ordinary members would be interested, let alone, understand "split-infinitive," in view of the Authors that language should be simple!? Obviously, official documents have to be treated with utmost care and perfection.

Keywords: European Commission, translation, English grammar guide, usefulness, cost

The Authors write that "[t]his style guide is intended primarily for English-language authors and translators (…) working for the European Commission." Its overriding aim in both parts of the Guide is to facilitate and encourage the writing of clear and reader-friendly English. I understand this to mean that English-language authors and translators (the latter employed, I assume, in the Directorate-General for Translation, do not know their own language, and as English-language authors and translators, they are in urgent need of help from the Authors, so that "[t]he language used in English texts should be understandable to speakers of Irish/British English (defined in the introduction to this guide as the shared standard usage of Ireland and the United Kingdom)." Since they also write that "[w]riting in

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1   No single Author is identified, but in the Introduction, we find a list of the current editorial committee.

clear language can be difficult at the Commission," the above address may be taken as an example of the difficulty of the Authors' use of clear language.

However, as they declare, they nevertheless must "try to set an example by using language that is as clear, simple and accessible as possible, out of courtesy to our readers and consideration for the image of the Commission." I think the opening sentence is a perfect example of "clarity, simplicity and accessibility."

Their intentions and efforts look like an exercise in futility, since we read in Wikipedia that "[t] he work of the various EU institutions, agencies and bodies relies on high-quality written translations by professional linguists". Thus the expert Authors of the Guide instruct the high-quality professional linguists, colleagues in EU (in the Directorate-General for Translation?) how to write. The first part of the Guide ends with the information that "[l]ots more, especially on chemistry, can be found via the IUPAC network webpage and in their Gold Book."

The general bad impression that I have about the Guide is that it is a haphazard collection of subjects: from punctuation, or split-infinitive to forms of address to the Science guide to biology, zoology, viruses, *etc*.

Particularly "important" recommendations for high-quality linguists are the following:

2.1. …punctuation marks in English are always – apart from dashes (see 2.17) and ellipsis
points (see 2.3) – closed up to the preceding word, letter or number;
2.2. A full stop marks the end of a sentence.
2.3. An ellipsis is three points indicating an omission in the text.

Strictly speaking, an ellipsis is NOT three points. It is the omission of one or more words, MARKED by three points.

In case high-quality linguists forget the important rule spelled out in 2.1., it is repeated for semicolons (2.10), questions (2.22) and exclamation marks (2.26).

As if this was not enough, we are informed in 2.13. that there is a "committee on commas". I understand that since this phrase appears in examples, it is taken from real documents produced by high-quality linguists.

The next few pages contain lists of various kinds of classified exceptions of spelling, for example, *-is/-iz*, double consonants, diagraphs, tricky spellings (*e.g.* criterion/criteria), prefixes, phrasal verbs, *etc*.

I think that checking the spelling would be simpler and faster using a dictionary or the Internet rather than finding the relevant item in the Guide.

Generally, I think that the Guide is totally useless for the high-quality professional linguists in the Directorate-General for Translation, and the Guide authors do ill-service to this unit, putting into doubt their qualifications.

In conclusion, I wish to take a stand on the Authors' hope expressed at the beginning of the Guide that the rules, reminders and handy references aim to serve a wider readership as well. I guess that the "wider readership" refers particularly to the parliament members and their assistants. Possibly unjustly, I have come to the conclusion that some/most of them are low education, mostly interested in financial profits, or safety from prison rather than real hard work. A glaring example is Richard Czarnecki, a parliament member, who *in winter drove some 1500 km in a cabrio that had been scrapped several years earlier*!??? Another example are criminals (though pardoned) who sat in the parliament hiding behind

the immunity, of which, however, they have been recently deprived. I very much doubt that this "wider readership" would be interested in the Style Guide either in English or their native language. From both points of view: the contents and the readership, the Guide is an exercise in futility. A final question is who ordered the Guide, and how much it cost and who benefitted from this confusing and dispensable publication?

Useful Sources

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